Step 2

Collect Needs Data and Inventory System Capacity

Tasks

- Consider strategies for collecting information
- Select a methodology for collecting needs data
- Inventory existing capacity dedicated to serving homeless people
- Inventory mainstream resources
- Compile information and validate findings

Purpose: *This session is designed to (1) assist participants with understanding the importance of deciding on a methodology for collecting needs data, and (2) introduce and discuss possible data collection and inventory strategies.*

Consider Strategies for Collecting Information

An important next step in the planning process is the identification of sources and methods for collecting data on the needs of homeless people. Each community will need to decide its strategy for determining who has this responsibility. The goal is to ensure that the data collected are as comprehensive as feasible, that providers and key stakeholders agree with the methodology and results they present, and that any shortcomings in the data are agreed upon as acceptable. Before deciding on a methodology, there are some principles to keep in mind when undertaking the significant and labor-intensive planning task of collecting and analyzing needs data.

> **2-1**
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> ### Guidance of Needs Data Collection
>
> - Identify who has capacity
> - Establish accountability
> - Cast a broad net
> - Provide for community input
> - Acknowledge shortcomings
> - Build consensus

Trainer should use Overhead 2-1 and the talking points below

Identify who has capacity: Collecting and analyzing needs data are labor-intensive and time-consuming tasks. Be realistic about who has the capacity to follow through and what methods would be least taxing on providers and the system, while at the same time yielding reasonably accurate and comprehensive data. There may be resources outside of the homeless provider network that can be tapped. For example, universities or metropolitan planning councils often have the capacity and interest to assist in data collection and analysis, though their assistance may not be pro bono.

Establish accountability: Ensure that someone or group is accountable for data collection and follow through, and is prepared to analyze and document the data collected in a user-friendly format for community review and input. (Communities may want to use a format similar to that of the Consolidated Plan.) This may be the Core Working Group or other designees.

Cast a broad net: Make sure data collection captures all sub-populations identified among homeless individuals, including veterans, people with mental illness, and people living with HIV/AIDS. In addition, there should be specific methods explored for capturing information on people who are homeless and are not engaged in any service or shelter system, such as people living on the street, in cars, in parks, or under bridges. A comprehensive Continuum of Care plan should include methods for quantifying and assessing the needs of this segment of the homeless population.

Provide for community input: Plan a formal iterative process (such as community meetings) to solicit ideas on sources of data and methodology of collection to 'reality test' data. This should include some discussion before and/or during data collection to solicit ideas for, and cooperation on, methods and sources.

Acknowledge shortcomings: Acknowledge any shortcomings of the accumulated data and identify strategies to collect additional data needed for planning (this may include plans for more rigorous and ongoing data gathering as part of the Continuum of Care plan implementation in subsequent years).

Build consensus: Ensure that there is consensus on the data collected, including acknowledgement of acceptable shortcomings in the data.

▶ *Using a flip chart, trainer can ask participants to think of possible sources of data. Trainer may use Overhead 2-2 to begin this discussion.*

2-2

Possible Sources of Needs Data

- Homeless and ancillary service providers: HIV/AIDS, youth mental health, addictions
- Consolidated Plan, Others (Ryan White, strategic plans)
- Existing homeless needs assessment, e.g. by a homeless coalition, city/state-sponsored census, local university
- Statewide organization, i.e. homeless or low income housing coalitions

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Select a Methodology for Collecting Needs Data

An essential foundation of a Continuum of Care plan is an assessment of the extent and types of need experienced by people who are homeless in the community. There is not just one correct way to collect needs data, but the Core Working Group, in coordination with the broader community of providers and stakeholder, must decide on a methodology and identify the resources and capacity to carry out needs data collection.

Sources and methods that different communities employ will vary depending on the size of the community, complexity of homeless populations, capacity of providers, and whether there are established mechanisms for collecting needs data, such as using data consistent with your homeless census or the community's Consolidated Plan.

◎ ▶ *Using Overhead 2-3, trainer can ask and discuss the following questions with participants.*

▶ *Trainer should point out the two sample needs surveys — one for providers (W-9) and one for consumers (W-7) — included in the workbook as examples of methodologies that have been used for Continuum of Care planning.*

Participants should complete this step of the planning process with general agreement on the soundness of the most recent data and any acceptable shortcomings. This information, together with the inventory described below, forms the basis of the discussion of gaps in the Continuum of Care system. Without consensus on this base line data, the gaps analysis may lack legitimacy and will make building consensus on unmet needs and priority gaps more challenging. *(See W-6: Exercise to Develop an Inventory of Need and Resources, W-7: Sample Needs Survey, W-8: Sample Community Survey, W-9: Sample Provider Survey.)*

2-3
Selecting a Methodology
• How will point-in-time data be collected on who is homeless and what their housing and service needs are?
• How will the data be analyzed and who will do it?
• How will the data be documented and the methodology described?
• How will sheltered and unsheltered homeless people be counted?
• How will duplication be avoided?
• How often will data be collected?
• Over time, how will changes in the data (demographics, numbers) be captured and utilized?

Inventory Existing Capacity Dedicated to Serving Homeless People

◎ ▶ *Here, trainer should refer back to the Continuum of Care graphic on Overhead i-2 to remind participants of the components of the Continuum of Care system as they think about inventorying capacity.*

In addition to assessing the extent of homelessness, participants need to inventory the existing capacity available to meet the needs of homeless people. This assessment should be conducted in the context of the Continuum of Care concept (i.e., outreach, emergency shelter and services, transitional programs, permanent housing, and permanent supportive housing).

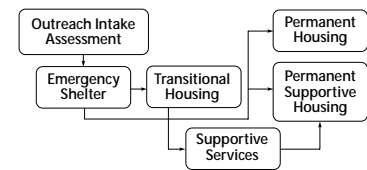| i-2 |
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| **Components of a Continuum of Care Homeless System** |

The initial community meeting(s) are an opportunity for providers and stakeholders to think about the homeless system in the context of a Continuum of Care framework. The inventory is an opportunity to look at existing capacity within the framework of a Continuum of Care system.

The approach used to inventory capacity will vary depending on the size and complexity of the homeless services system. As with the collection of homeless needs data, the Core Working Group may want to take the lead in conducting an inventory and then present its findings for community input and reality testing. Larger communities may want to use subcommittees to look at particular components of the Continuum of Care system. Smaller communities may want to use a community meeting to solicit this information and then supplement it with follow-up phone calls.

▶ *Included among the workbook materials is a sample Exercise to Develop Inventory of Needs and Resources (W-6). Trainer can elicit some ideas from the participants, depending on group and time constraints.*

Inventory Mainstream Resources

▶ *Trainer can ask why mainstream resources are important to developing a Continuum of Care system and elicit responses, then summarize with the points below.*

Comprehensive inventory: A comprehensive inventory of capacity and resources for a Continuum of Care plan should include a look at resources that lie outside of the traditional homeless system and its providers. It should include "mainstream" affordable housing resources, such as conventional public housing, Section 8 and other rental subsidy programs, and other affordable housing and community development resources available in the community. The Consolidated Plan is a good source for this information, as well as key housing providers, such as Public Housing Authorities and non-profit housing agencies.

Communities should ensure that this inventory includes service capacity and resources that could be available to people who are homeless, such as mental health services and substance abuse treatment. Discussions with and/or surveys of funders and providers of these services can help provide this information.

Leverage mainstream resources: A comprehensive Continuum of Care plan should include strategies to leverage and engage "mainstream" housing and service resources.

Accessing mainstream housing and services is important to Continuum of Care development and implementation because the addition of these resources will:

- Better support people's movement out of homelessness
- Avoid the creation of parallel systems of care
- Ensure that new resources, such as McKinney Homeless Assistance funding, are used to meet the unique needs of a homeless population where no other resources exist

For example, under welfare reform, it may become more necessary to support women in job training and placement while in shelters and transitional housing programs. Though this is identified as a priority "gap" in existing services, the solution may not be new targeted funding for this service, but rather facilitated access to state and federal programs already available to families receiving transitional assistance.

Link with other planning processes: Finally, there may also be other planning processes underway (Ryan White Care Act, Empowerment or Enterprise Zones, or Neighborhood Revitalization planning efforts) that should be looked at for information on available and current use of resources in areas such as health care, job training and placement, and child care.

▶ *Trainer should elicit and suggest possible sources of information on mainstream resources (i.e., Consolidated Plan, Ryan White), or provider strategic plans.*

▶ *Trainer should also point out that surveys or stakeholder interviews with funders or providers in key areas such as mental health, substance abuse, affordable housing, job training and placement, and childcare are an effective way of gathering information on mainstream resources.*

Compile Information and Validate Findings

▶ *Trainer should use talking points below to highlight the importance of this step.*

- Compile and synthesize needs and inventory data in a manner that can be analyzed for use by the Core Working Group and broader community of homeless providers and stakeholders.
- Provide opportunities for community review and input to validate findings and ensure consensus.
- It is important to finish this step of the planning process with consensus on the data because these needs and inventory data form the basis of the gaps analysis.

As with the needs data, it is important that the inventory of resources and capacity in the homeless system and the inventory of mainstream resources be compiled and synthesized in a manner from which an analysis can begin. This will likely be the task of the Core Working Group or some appointed subset of the Core Working Group.

Once compiled and synthesized, these findings should likewise be available for community review and input to ensure that the inventory accurately and sufficiently reflects different stakeholders' understanding of what capacity and resources exist.

It is important to finish this step of the planning process with consensus on the data because these needs and inventory data form the basis of the gaps analysis.

Outcomes

- Collection of quantitative and qualitative information on homelessness
- Inventory of existing capacity/mainstream resources
- Consensus on data, including acceptable shortcomings